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‘Rejecting all adventurism’: The Italian Communist Party and the movements of 1972-9

Abstract

The history of the Italian Communist Party in the 1960s and 1970s was marked by the party’s engagement with a succession of radical competitors. Following Sidney Tarrow, I argue that the party benefited from its engagement with the ‘cycle of contention’ which culminated in the Hot Autumn of 1969. However, a second cycle can also be identified, running from 1972 to 1979 and fuelled by ‘autonomist’ readings of Marxism. The paper contrasts the party’s constructive engagement with the first cycle of contention and its hostile engagement with this second group of movements. It identifies both ideological and conjunctural reasons for the Italian communist party’s failure to engage constructively with the second cycle of contention, situating this within the context of Enrico Berlinguer’s leadership of the party. Lastly, it argues that this hostile engagement was a major contributory factor to the suppression of the movements; the growth of ‘armed struggle’ groups; and the decline of the Italian communist party itself. It is argued that the orientation of a ‘gatekeeper’ party at a particular historical conjuncture may have far-reaching effects, both for the party itself and for society more broadly.

Keywords: Italian Communist Party, cycle of contention, gatekeeper, Autonomia, historic compromise.

Closed systems and gatekeepers: the Italian case

Sidney Tarrow’s model of the ‘protest cycle’ or ‘cycle of contention’, developed originally to describe the rise and fall of Italian radical movements in the late 1960s, identifies how new and challenging protest tactics can be absorbed into the political mainstream, even while the social movements which have given rise to these new tactics are denied legitimacy and marginalised. The cycle of contention, as Tarrow describes it, is driven by tactical innovation. A crucial concept here is the tactical ‘repertoire’: ‘at once a structural and a cultural concept, involving not only what people *do* when they are engaged in conflict with others but what they *know how to*

do and what others *expect* them to do.’ (Tarrow 1998: 30; emphasis in original)

Different repertoires are thus available in different societies and periods. The interaction between challenging social movements and mainstream political forces is a key location of repertoire innovation. A cycle of contention begins with the spread of a new repertoire into different geographical and social areas. Existing organisations respond by adopting the new repertoire ‘in more diffuse and less militant form’. The cycle peaks with widespread diffusion and emulation, then declines as assimilation and neutralisation prevail. The end result is the demobilisation of the new movements and the adoption of most of the new repertoire by existing organisations; this in turn results in ‘a permanent expansion of the repertoire of democratic participation to include forms of action that were not present before’ (Tarrow 1989: 67).

The model assumes that no new social movement can establish itself within the political sphere unaided, successfully claiming legitimacy for its own repertoire. In other words, a cycle of contention is only possible in the context of a relatively closed political system. The characteristics of political systems in which a cycle of contention is possible can be specified more precisely by reference to a typology of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ states. Kriesi suggest there is an inverse relationship between the ‘output’ capacity of a state and the opportunities it offers for ‘input’. While a ‘strong’ state can both impose its will and resist pressure from below, in a weak and ineffectual state, ‘[f]ragmentation, lack of internal coordination, and lack of professionalisation multiply the points of access’ (Kriesi 1995: 171). Post-war Italy is clearly a poor example of a strong state in Kriesi’s terms. The first Italian republic was notorious for its kaleidoscopic sequence of short-lived governing coalitions: between the republic’s first general election in 1948 and the eruption of the *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville) scandal in 1993, Italy had forty-six governments.

However, it can be doubted whether, in practice, the fragmentation and lack of professionalism of the post-war Italian governments did in fact create numerous points of access. These governments were built from a remarkably small and stable set of components, uniformly predicated on the occupation of power by the centre-right *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democracy; DC). Fifteen of the forty-six governments were DC-only; in the others the DC shared power with just four smaller parties, assorted over the years in ten different combinations. Democratic

politics was largely subordinated to horsetrading among factions, personalities and personal factions within the DC and, to a lesser extent, within the smaller parties. Throughout the period, the opportunities for new political parties to grow and establish themselves, or for extra-institutional formations to put down roots within the parliamentary system, were small to non-existent.

This experience suggests a four-way typology of state openness and strength, in terms of centres of power and points of access to the political system. We can distinguish between the ‘citadel’ model (Kriesi’s strong state), with a high concentration of power and few points of influence; the ‘network’ (Kriesi’s weak state) with diffused power and many points of influence; and two other possibilities: the ‘machine’, with concentrated power but many points of influence from below, and the ‘court’, whose multiple centres of power are all insulated against influence from below (see Table 1).

Table 1: Types of state defined by concentration of power and points of access

		Points of access to political system	
		<i>Many</i>	<i>Few</i>
Centres of power	<i>Many</i>	Network (‘weak state’) Multiple points of influence; no concentration of political power	Court Multiple centres of political power; little accountability
	<i>Few</i>	Machine Concentrated political power, open to influence from below	Citadel (‘strong state’) Concentrated and unaccountable political power

The ‘democratic centralist’ structures adopted by communist parties and states are (at least in principle) an example of the ‘machine’ model, combining openness to influence with an unchallenged executive; similar claims have been advanced for the British parliamentary system. The political system of post-war Italy, by contrast, can be seen in terms of the oligarchic ‘court’ model, combining an autocracy’s closure to outside influence with the executive weakness of a polycentric system; Ginsborg

notes 'the archipelago nature of the DC state' (Ginsborg 1990: 155). The *Partito Comunista Italiano* (Italian Communist Party; PCI) played an ambivalent role in this system; while excluded from governmental power, it figured as an eternal candidate for membership of the governmental elite, as well as exercising a degree of political power through affiliated unions and local government.

This four-way typology specifies the conditions under which a cycle of contention may take place. Both the 'network' and the 'machine' state are in principle permeable from below, albeit (in the second case) permeable through officially approved channels. Monolithic 'citadel' states, by contrast, do not have the structural internal tensions which can be exacerbated by external contenders, and resolved by neutralising them. The kind of cycle of contention outlined by Tarrow, and the role of 'gatekeeper', are characteristic primarily of 'court' states - where power is distributed, and to some extent contested, within a network of unaccountable centres.

It is also worth stressing that the gatekeeper role has its own specificity, in that not every political party will have either the capacity or the motivation to adopt and absorb new and radical tactics. The gatekeeper role has as its function the stabilisation of the system by neutralising the threat posed by a disruptive external force; it is occupied by parties which are seen to occupy an extreme of the legitimate political spectrum. The threat may be neutralised by appropriating the contending force's repertoire and claiming the loyalty of its supporters, in the inclusive model of the cycle of contention put forward by Tarrow. Alternatively, a gatekeeper may reject the contender outright and neutralise the threat it poses by reframing its repertoire and its membership as irredeemably beyond legitimation - as subversive, criminal or insane.

The PCI as gatekeeper, 1966-77

Between 1966 and 1979, the PCI played the 'gatekeeper' role in two successive cycles of contention. In the late 1960s, the PCI and its affiliated union the *Confederazione Generale Italiana dei Lavoratori* (General Italian Workers' Confederation; CGIL) was confronted by a wave of innovative student activism, which fed into a wave of wildcat industrial action. Wildcat strikes were instigated by workerist activists, whose demands for workers' power were encapsulated in slogans

such as 'More pay! Less work!'. Despite their less radical perspectives, the party and the CGIL took ownership of the strikes and delivered an agreed settlement. Some of the new tactics gained union endorsement, but over time most fell into disuse.

As this first cycle of contention drew to a close with the decline of industrial action, the strikers had not only achieved many of their demands but succeeded in expanding the repertoire of legitimate protest tactics. Meanwhile the PCI had successfully held the balance between opening the party to innovative forms of activism and endorsing potentially uncontrollable sources of disruption. The fact that the outcome of the cycle was progressive, from the point of view of society at large, was the result of a constructive dialogue between a political actor - the PCI - and a movement outside the legitimate political sphere, in which the PCI played the key role. While never anything less than hostile to the social movement organisations which confronted it, the PCI proved capable in this period of delivering many of their objectives, appropriating most of their tactical repertoires and winning back their followers.

Between 1972 and 1979, by contrast, the PCI was faced by a series of inter-related social movements organised primarily outside the workplace, and responded with dogged and uncomprehending resistance. The party denounced the new movements first as 'adventurist' extremists, then as provocateurs aiming to damage the left and finally as nihilistic hooligans bent on destruction for its own sake (The shifting 'frames' applied by the party to the movements are detailed in Edwards (2009).) The party dismissed the movements' new tactical repertoires as anarchic self-indulgence, vandalism and petty crime; the only hint at dialogue was a suggestion that the party would be prepared to deal with the membership of the movements, on condition that they first repudiated the movements' leadership, their tactics and their ideology.

The closure of this second cycle of contention was longer and more difficult. Activists of the second cycle had no successes which they could claim, and hence no incentive to withdraw with dignity. In the face of mounting repression (which itself was enthusiastically endorsed by the PCI), the choice was between admitting defeat and attempting to survive the clampdown through greater militarisation. The peak year for mass political activism in this period was 1977; it is striking that the peak year for small-group 'armed struggle' activity was 1978. The PCI's refusal of dialogue - even

the kind of hostile and opportunistic dialogue which had closed the first cycle of contention - led to the definitive exclusion of the movements from legitimate politics, which in turn encouraged a minority to engage in 'armed struggle' activism. Nor was the outcome positive for the PCI itself: far from expanding the range of legitimate protest tactics, the party constricted its own tactical and ideological range so as to minimise any overlap with the detested movements. This negative closure of a cycle of contention was, once again, very largely the result of choices made by the PCI.

An ambivalent gatekeeper: the PCI, 1943-63

The different choices made by the party in its role as gatekeeper to the political system should be set in the context of the party's unusual and ambivalent history. In 1943, the first year of the PCI's existence under that name, the party had approximately 6,000 members. Thanks to an open-door recruitment policy and active involvement in the Italian resistance, party membership had grown to 400,000 by the end of 1944. Membership passed the 1,000,000 mark in 1945 and peaked in 1947 at a little over 2,250,000: around 5% of the entire population (Shore 1990: 34, Istituto Carlo Cattaneo 2005). After the liberation of the country, the PCI played a leading role in the post-war Constituent Assembly which drew up the constitution of the new Italian republic, and formed part of the first few post-war governments.

The PCI thus succeeded in combining mass membership with a record of political involvement at the elite level, in a way which was highly unusual for western european communist parties. This can be related to the *via italiana al socialismo* (Italian road to socialism) elaborated by the party's post-war leader Palmiro Togliatti. Togliatti proposed that a democratic government should be formed through an alliance of the PCI with progressive elements of the bourgeoisie, and should commit itself to 'structural reforms' (agrarian reform, nationalisation of the leading monopolies). The *via italiana* thus involved mobilising around intermediate goals, rather than either enlisting the working class in a perilous and divisive frontal struggle for socialism or proposing a reformed capitalist democracy as an end in itself. This process of continual and incremental mobilisation would enable communists to extend their presence within society; as well as serving as a bulwark against a revival of fascism, they would give democratic legitimacy - and renewed impetus - to a

communist presence in government. The result would be a party which was 'institutionally pro-system - the champion of the new democratic republic - and yet anti-system - antagonistic to capitalism' (Sassoon 2003: 41).

Within the political system of post-war Italy, the PCI thus occupied a structurally ambivalent position. To the other main political parties, the party was (or aimed to be) a potential partner in a programme of democratic reform and constitutional renewal; to its members and potential members, it was the embodiment of a socialist alternative to capitalist democracy, which it expressed through propaganda, through collective celebrations and (most importantly) by organising workers in struggle. In Togliatti's vision, these two visions could effectively be delegated to different parts of the party, which could work together in creative mutual tension. Communists in government could direct the base towards achievable and appropriate short-term goals; pressure from below, meanwhile, would ensure that reforms were integrated into a programme for social transformation, preventing a drift into reformism.

Unfortunately the PCI was excluded from government in 1947, never to return; indeed, in later years attempts were frequently made to deprive the party of political legitimacy altogether, painting it as 'anti-system' (Sartori 1976). These conditions made the dual nature of the PCI problematic. On one hand, the party's radical base was used to discredit it as a reformist force, opening it to accusations of duplicity and subversive tendencies. Ironically, these accusations were widely echoed - approvingly - by party members. In the period of mass membership growth, the pre-war hardcore membership, and even the substantial wartime party, had been vastly outnumbered by members who had their own understanding of communism. 'For them the communist party was the party of the Resistance, but they were also attracted to communism by the example of the Soviet Union in the war and by Stalin. ... "Ha' da veni' Baffone" ["Big Moustaches is coming"] was the rallying cry of the southern workers' (Sassoon 1981: 33). The party's professed moderation was widely seen as a facade hiding cunning radical designs. Togliatti commented in 1946:

'Whenever we delve into the minds of our comrades, we find the strangest conception of what communism and our party should be, conceptions which are difficult to reconcile with our party line. Acceptance of this line is often

superficial or formal, or is justified by the same stupid epithets as our opponents use regarding us (“tactics”, “trickery”, “secret plan” and so forth).’ (quoted in Sassoon 1981: 30).

More sympathetically, veteran leftist Danilo Montaldi vividly evoked the survival of a shared, but unspoken, belief in revolution within the PCI in the 1950s:

When in winter the labourers in the rail and coal yards, or the *terrazzieri* working in the fields, discover that they must spend the day out in the open, they seek out the nearest bar to procure a “*sottovoce*” [“undertone”] (a shot of grappa), so-called because the sale of alcohol is supposed to be prohibited before noon. Within the party, “*sottovoce*” has become the term which hints at that *other* possibility: the revolutionary seizure of power. (Montaldi 1971, quoted in Wright 1998)

Montaldi likens the tacit survival of a shared vision of revolution to the comfort provided by a comradely bartender - and the PCI’s overt programme to regulations imposed on the workers by Italian capitalism. On this reading, the belief in a ‘hidden agenda’ arose not from party members’ perversity or stupidity, but from their belief that the party was inherently committed to revolution, so that its apparent adherence to a reformist programme must be a temporary adaptation to external pressure.

This way of thinking, however, brings out the other danger of the party’s ambivalent position: that its overt commitment to reformist politics would effectively discredit the party as a radical force. Belief in the existence of a secret radical agenda tended to downgrade the importance of the PCI’s overt - and genuine - agenda, and hence to discourage party members from day-to-day activism. Thus in 1956, Togliatti attacked the ‘maximalist sectarianism’ which was ‘withdrawn within itself waiting for the “great day”’ (quoted in Sassoon 1981: 194). Of the Turin PCI federation in the early 1960s, Amyot writes: ‘Having lost the perspective of an “X-hour”, [older members] had become discouraged and ceased to devote their energies to day-to-day struggles. ... There were workers who were in favour of an eventual armed seizure of power, but refused to take part in strikes.’ (Amyot 1981: 123)

The PCI's exclusion from government was exacerbated in 1963 by the decision of the centre-left *Partito Socialista Italiano* (Italian Socialist Party; PSI) to join a government coalition as a junior partner to the DC. This was seen as marking the incorporation into the DC 'system' of a party with a significant claim to represent the left. On one hand this would broaden the DC's appeal and reinforce its hold on power; on the other, it threatened to polarise Italian politics between the DC bloc and the communists, marginalising the latter.

Berlinguer opens the gate...

Togliatti died in 1964; his replacement as party leader, Resistance veteran Luigi Longo, was widely seen as a caretaker leader. The party was divided between right- and left-wing tendencies represented by Giorgio Amendola and Pietro Ingrao. Ingrao proposed that a cross-class alliance should be built on the basis of an appeal to left-wing PSI and DC voters, with the aim of implementing structural reforms to capitalism. This governmental alliance would be backed by 'a network of centres of local power and direct democracy' (Amyot 1981: 59), built by establishing bases in local government and the trade unions. The goal was to build 'a "new historic bloc" of social forces ... primarily in civil society rather than at the political level' (Amyot 1981: 61). By contrast, Amendola looked forward to 'the communists' entry into government as the only party capable of ensuring the success of a reform programme' (Amyot 1981: 64). For Amendola, communist participation in government was necessary as well as sufficient for the survival of capitalist democracy: if the working class needed a left-wing alternative, so did the progressive bourgeoisie.

While the Amendolan tendency was dominant, the Ingraian left remained a substantial tendency within the party, with significant implications for the party's engagement with the first cycle of contention. The initial encounter was not encouraging. In 1968 the communist film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini apostrophised radical students in a poem: 'You have the faces of spoilt brats./Breeding will out./ ... when you were fighting the cops/I was on the side of the cops!/Because the cops come from poor families.' (quoted in Echaurren and Salaris 1999: 91) Amendola was similarly hostile, calling for 'a struggle against the "extremist and anarchist positions

that have appeared in the student movement” and “revolutionary vigilance” because of the possibility of “provocateurs” in the movement.’ (Amyot 1981: 175).

Amendola’s call for vigilance was countered by the young Ingraian Rossana Rossanda, who proposed to integrate the student movement into the Ingraian project of a new ‘historic bloc’: ‘the movements could create situations of “dual power” throughout society ... a new, non-Leninist type of party would be necessary, one that would not “direct” the mass movements, but would exercise “hegemony” over them’ (Amyot 1981: 176) The debate was resolved at the Twelfth PCI Congress in January 1969, where Enrico Berlinguer displayed his aptitude for formulating positions which preserved party unity by combining left- and right-wing versions of PCI orthodoxy: ‘Berlinguer proposed that the autonomy of the various mass movements be recognised. Furthermore, they were to be an integral part of the Party’s strategy for the conquest of power, as they formed part of the “historic bloc” the PCI was seeking to form ... in practice Berlinguer proposed to insert the new mass movements into the PCI’s struggle for a new parliamentary equilibrium’ (Amyot 1981: 177-8)

Despite his conciliatory reference to the movement’s autonomy and his Ingraian use of the Gramscian phrase ‘historic bloc’, Berlinguer’s approach was essentially institutional. Berlinguer aligned himself explicitly with neither left nor right, aiming instead to unite the party around a version of the PCI right’s institutional approach, expressed in terms which evoked the Ingraian project for long-term social transformation. Nevertheless, the opening to the left was real enough to enable the party and the CGIL to swim with the tide of the movement, particularly once it had spread to the factories. PCI right-winger Giorgio Napolitano later wrote,

In 1968 and 1969 the unions had serious difficulties and had to carry out a major effort at renewal, but they fully affirmed their leadership in shaping the struggles of 1969, precisely because they understood the lesson and the thrust which had come from the young people’s protest
(Napolitano 1977: 36-7)

Franco Berardi of the workerist group Potere Operaio described this learning experience less sympathetically: ‘again and again, autonomous organisations

organised strikes in one section of a factory, after which the union came in, asked all the workers what their demand was, and used it to regain control of a struggle which had completely got out of their hands' (quoted in Grandi 2003: 110).

The strategy adopted by the PCI and CGIL was not simply one of opportunism, however. In order to offer leadership to the strikers and students, the party needed first of all to recognise them as part of its constituency - which meant, among other things, breaking with Pasolini's insistence on being 'on the side of the cops'. 'Extremist and anarchist positions' needed to be redefined as class anger, and spoilt brats redefined as members of the working class.

An example of this process of redefinition is furnished by a February 1969 news story from the PCI newspaper *l'Unità*. Students protesting against a state visit by the then US president Richard Nixon had been blockaded inside Rome University; attempts to break out were met with police charges. The centre-right *Corriere della Sera* wrote about the demonstration in terms of 'urban guerrilla warfare', 'fierce hand-to-hand fighting with the men in uniform', 'a climate of near-revolutionary agitation' (Madeo 1969). *L'Unità*'s correspondent saw the same events differently:

the demonstrators demonstrated their determination to avoid a confrontation ... As the police charges continued, the young people blocked via della Panetteria and via dei Crociferi with cars. Some cars were burned out ... Again and again, the students made sorties from the besieged university; every time, they had to face police violence. In the evening, to protect themselves from the charges of police jeeps, the students blocked all the streets around the university with makeshift barriers; police charges took place throughout the area.
(Marzullo 1969)

What is particularly striking is not the fact that the two papers take different sides but the fact that each presents its preferred antagonist as peaceable, blaming the outbreak of violence - which both agree took place - on the other side. In the *Corriere* police acting under orders are faced with 'hand-to-hand fighting' and 'urban guerrilla warfare'; in *l'Unità* demonstrators who are determined to avoid confrontation are subjected to gratuitous 'police violence', blockading streets with cars only in

self-defence. This kind of partisanship on the PCI's part was a necessity if the party was to assert leadership over the new movements, while maintaining its own self-image as a constitutional political party committed to the expansion of Italian democracy and the achievement of peaceable reform.

A key focus for the CGIL, in terms of reform, was the 1969 industrial contract round, which would determine pay and conditions for the next three years. In December 1969 a settlement was reached which reflected many of the strikers' demands; it was accompanied by the passage of the *Statuto dei Lavoratori* (Workers' Statute), enshrining workers' and union rights in law, together with a retroactive amnesty for anyone convicted of offences related to the strike wave. When the Workers' Statute became law in May 1970, numerous violent and disorderly acts ceased to *have been* crimes: a striking feat of retrospective redefinition, which can be seen to represent the high-water mark of the first wave.

Subsequently, innovative and disruptive workplace activism continued and even spread, but took place with the approval of the CGIL. The union thus embraced innovative forms of action while rejecting the political perspectives which had accompanied them. In doing so, the CGIL was not only protecting its own interests but responding to its members' demands. As the union re-established control, these demands in turn grew more moderate; even if union-centred activism was a comedown from the heights of 1969, after a point it was the only game in town.

...and shuts it again

In 1972 Longo resigned, to be replaced by Berlinguer. Berlinguer's opening to the left had been real but temporary. In the unsettled period following the death of Togliatti, the new movements were a key point of reference for the left of the PCI and a potential destabilising factor for the party as a whole. Berlinguer's centrism had aimed primarily to neutralise a potential threat to the coherence of the party, by integrating the movements' potentially disruptive innovations into an overall institutional strategy. By presenting a version of communist orthodoxy which evoked the Ingraian left, Berlinguer gave the left and its positions qualified 'orthodox' endorsement; the effect was to make possible an imaginative and flexible engagement

with the first cycle of contention, particularly on the part of the CGIL. Berlinguer's position, resting in part on his appropriation of the language of Ingraian leftism, was further strengthened by the exclusion of Rossanda and other younger Ingraian from the party in October 1969, following the publication of an article critical of the Soviet Union in the recently-launched journal *il manifesto*.

Once his position as secretary of the PCI was assured, however, Berlinguer could advance a new and distinctive strategy. In some key respects Berlinguer was a product of the Amendolan right, prioritising alliances over reform, deprecating industrial militancy and believing that the first goal of a communist presence in government would be to save capitalism from crisis. However, he was prepared to think the hitherto unthinkable, bypassing the secular left and centre to approach the DC directly. This was the strategy of *compromesso storico* ('historic compromise'). In Berlinguer's words, the goal was 'collaboration between the great movements of the people: communist, socialist and Catholic' (Amyot 1981: 202). Berlinguer's proposal went far beyond the Ingraian's openness to the Catholic left: Berlinguer appeared sympathetic to Christianity as such, which he believed shared with communism a critique of liberal individualism and an emphasis on social solidarity and discipline. In practical terms, Berlinguer proposed a government of national unity, progressing to a governing alliance with the DC which would ultimately be dominated by the PCI. 'The days of [bourgeois] hegemony are over ... The historic compromise will provide the transition period to the new hegemony,' Berlinguer's ally Antonio Tatò argued in 1977 (Ruscoe 1982: 114-5).

Meanwhile a new wave of contentious activism had begun: in 1972-3, groups organising under the banner of *Autonomia* (Autonomy) began to proliferate. The PCI's response was obdurate. Wildcat industrial activism was dealt with severely. In 1975 the Innocenti automotive factory outside Milan was threatened with closure by its owner, British Leyland. A march on the factory, attempting to mobilise workers after a union-sanctioned half-day strike, was rejected ideologically and physically:

The workers' response was firm: the strangers were thrown out at the gates. A little later all the workers of Innocenti Leyland met in a general assembly, restating their will to confirm their own priorities in struggle, rejecting all

adventurism and all traps of provocateurs, calling for the withdrawal of union membership from the three workers who led the ‘attack’ on the factory
(Anon. 1975)

The following year a writer in the *Corriere della Sera* noted approvingly, ‘rigidly marshalled by the unions ... FIAT workers are ever less receptive to extreme suggestions.’ (Passanisi 1976) By now the focus of autonomist activism had already shifted outside the workplace: the tactic of *autoriduzione* (‘self-reduction’) of rent and utility bills was taken up in hundreds of thousands of households. Autonomists advised households to pay the industrial rate for electricity, 25% of the domestic rate; a popular slogan was ‘We’ll pay what Agnelli pays’, referring to the head of FIAT. The tactic was extended into what became known as *spese proletarie* (‘proletarian shopping’) in 1974, when a group of demonstrators in Milan forced a supermarket manager to cut prices (Wright 2002: 159).

On occasion *autoriduzione* gave way to outright *espropriazione* (‘expropriation’). In September 1975, PCI-approved demonstrations against Franco’s Spain were followed by rioting in Rome, Naples and Turin. As well as clashing with the police, the autonomists smashed shop windows and looted goods. No less confrontational, the ‘proletarian youth movement’ which emerged in 1976 applied the logic of *autoriduzione* to the costs of leisure, proclaiming *il diritto di lusso* (the right to luxury); groups withheld payment in restaurants and demanded cheap cinema tickets.

All of this the PCI met with baffled hostility. The only significant attempt to appropriate the tactics of the new movement came from a few CGIL organisers who endorsed *autoriduzione* of electricity bills, albeit with a reduction of 50% rather than 75% (Wright 2002: 158). However, this approach never received central CGIL or PCI approval. On the left, Rossanda mustered enough sympathy for the autonomists to dismiss them as confused teenagers: ‘I understand what has led many young people to break shop windows, but I don’t consider it a stage in the Italian revolution.’ (Monicelli 1978: 168). Duccio Trombadori’s anathema was more typical: ‘People who smash shop windows, like people who encourage attacks on the police ... must not be allowed a place in the ranks of popular and proletarian mass action.’ (Monicelli 1978: 56). Similarly, ‘proletarian shopping’ was met with unremitting

opposition, which took physical as well as ideological form: *l'Unità* in 1974 praised the party members who had intervened in support of the shop manager at the Milan supermarket demonstration, which it denounced as a 'disgraceful exhibition' mounted by a 'group of provocateurs' (Anon. 1974).

In 1976, the *compromesso* strategy bore equivocal fruit in the formation of a minority DC government, sustained by a pledge from the PCI not to move a vote of no confidence. Driven by the hope of entering government in earnest, the party leadership embraced the right-wing argument that the current economic crisis required cuts in wages and public spending, despite the fact that these costs would be borne by the party's own constituency. In October 1976 Berlinguer called for a 'war on waste', specifically including 'laxity in work and study' (Berlinguer 1976); the following January Lama put forward a doctrine of 'austerity', renouncing 'industrial platforms centred on salary' (Anon. 1977a). Berlinguer put a hopeful spin on the theme of austerity later that month: 'Austerity, by definition, means restrictions on certain availabilities to which we have become accustomed ... But we are deeply convinced that to replace certain habits of life with others that are more exacting and not extravagant, can lead not to a worsening in the quality of life, but to substantial improvement, to growth in the 'humanity' of life.' (quoted in Sassoon 1978: 135)

The situation came to a head in February 1977, in a direct and physical confrontation between the CGIL and the 'movement of 1977', a student-based movement which was the latest offshoot of the cycle. Addressing an unsympathetic audience in the occupied university of Rome, CGIL leader Luciano Lama called on the students to 'fight and defeat fascism, reactionary temptations, subversive provocations, every form of violence and every irrational temptation' (Lama 1977) - a list clearly intended to include the occupation itself. Lama's reception was rowdy; a group of self-proclaimed 'Metropolitan Indians' pelted Lama's stewards with water-bombs, while chanting derisive slogans such as 'More work! Less pay!'. As well as a mocking inversion of the old workerist slogan, this made an uncomfortably apt summing-up of the 'austerity' policies advocated by Lama and the PCI.

The rioting which broke out at the close of Lama's speech pitched students against CGIL stewards: a traumatic confrontation for both sides. For one participant in the

occupation, the PCI was ‘an ideological father-figure - a father who should give you shelter but betrays you instead’ (Balestrini and Moroni 1997: 537). The PCI’s conclusions were, if anything, even more hostile: for both Lama and party leader Enrico Berlinguer, the autonomists represented fascism in a new guise (Tornabuoni 1977, Berlinguer 1977). Party intellectual Alberto Asor Rosa took a more sophisticated view, arguing that the PCI faced an alliance of marginalised social groups organised against the working class: ‘their concern is to throw the “second society” into an attack on the “first” so as to disorganise and destroy it, because it’s precisely through this disorganisation and destruction that passing needs can be satisfied without waiting for tomorrow’ (Asor Rosa 1977).

Either way, the movement could only be met with hostility, backed by strenuous efforts to dissociate the party from its tactics and methods. As recently as 1973, the Communist-run council in Bologna had introduced free bus travel during the morning and evening rush hours, an experiment hailed by *l’Unità* as ‘A major initiative by a democratic council’ (Anon. 1973). Now, however, any such action was ruled out, with *autoriduzione* criticised as inherently harmful to working-class unity: ‘Italian workers, as a whole, have shown that they are aware that forms of struggle such as the occupation of houses and “autoriduzione” ... display, in general terms, the characteristic of preventing mass participation by many of those whose interests are affected, gravely limiting the breadth of mobilisation’ (Fasola 1975). A leading member of the Turin party put it more bluntly in 1978, arguing that the party’s message should be: ‘Listen, comrades, some of the things (free rent, free transport) you are asking for are just stupid’ (Hellman 1988: 97)

The exclusion called for by Trombadori was carried out literally as well as figuratively: PCI stewards policed demonstrations and repeatedly prevented autonomist groups from joining (Del Bello 1997: 309, 312, 316). However forceful its own actions, the party consistently presented itself as responding to violent provocation with resolution and discipline. In March 1977 a large group of PCI stewards charged a group of students in Turin (Novaro 1991: 171); the following day a meeting of the local party proclaimed its ‘commitment to avoid falling into the trap of violence, set ... by squads of fascist provocateurs’ (Anon. 1977b). This was not self-criticism: violence was associated with the student ‘provocateurs’, and to attempt

to engage with them would be precisely to fall into their 'trap'. By trying to clear the students off the street, the party had avoided that trap; the use of disciplined physical force had averted the possibility of violence. The students did not necessarily see it this way; some activists who later joined armed struggle groups recalled this incident as a defining moment in their disillusionment with the PCI (Novaro 1991: 152).

While a few reacted to political exclusion by taking up arms, and many reacted with disillusion and disengagement, some responded more creatively. Many movement publications celebrated *estraneità* (extraneousness), a condition of cultural and political self-sufficiency and willed isolation from the mainstream. In 1975, the first issue of the journal *A/traverso* announced that 'the movement has gone far beyond politics ... it's situated in a dimension defined by radical extraneousness and refusal. It's not concerned with struggling against this State ... even antagonistic direct action is a poor thing, compared to the richness that the subject in movement can develop' (reprinted in Chaosmaleont 2001). Perhaps the ultimate expression of this outlook was the Metropolitan Indians, a group which flourished in 1977 and combined counter-cultural primitivism with unsparing mockery aimed at the PCI, the armed groups, the autonomists and anyone else who caught their attention. If the movements were extraneous to the political sphere, the Indians were extraneous to the movements; their main slogan was the defiantly meaningless syllable 'Oask!'.

A constructive engagement with the Metropolitan Indians was probably not possible, and in any case was not desired. The Metropolitan Indian phenomenon can be seen as an outstanding example of surrealist revolutionary ingenuity; it can also be judged symptomatically, as the sign of a social movement which had been denied any kind of dialogue with the political sphere, and as a result had turned in on itself. In other words, the emergence of the Indians, like the subsequent rise of the armed groups, can be seen as a pathological sign of a failed engagement.

The PCI under Berlinguer was particularly ill-equipped to function as a gatekeeper towards any of the movements of the second cycle of contention, for two reasons. Firstly, we can reasonably view hostility to the radical left as the party's default position and the earlier openness to the left as an anomaly. The PCI had always had a tendency to associate the political right with progressive cross-class alliances and the

left with the hazards of disorderly activism. By 1972 the instability within the party which had made the movements of the first cycle a potential problem for the PCI, and hence allowed for the solution of a constructive engagement, no longer existed: Berlinguer's leadership was broadly popular, while the exclusion of the *il manifesto* group greatly reduced the risk of a challenge from the left. In the absence of such countervailing conjunctural pressures, it was predictable that the party would be predisposed to hostility towards the movements of the second cycle

Secondly, the unusual direction taken by the party under Berlinguer's leadership made any kind of opening to the movements of the second cycle particularly difficult. Berlinguer's argument that the working people of Italy should be happy to adopt an 'austere' lifestyle was typical. Indeed, Berlinguer's innovative (not to say quixotic) strategy of appealing to the shared moral foundations of the DC and PCI rested on a critique of individualism, libertarianism and materialism which 'owed more to certain schools of Christian social thought than to either Marxist or even liberal democratic doctrine' (Hellman 1988: 22). In contrast, the entrenched and defiant libertarianism which characterised the movements of the second cycle of contention was seen, at best, as a symptom of social dysfunction, as in Asor Rosa's warning of the dangers posed by the 'second society'. The party had 'a deeply negative reaction to what it considered episodes of degeneration and social breakdown, which the *compromesso* would remedy by recomposing a system in crisis.' (Hellman 1988: 218)

Counting the cost of closure

Instead of appropriating and absorbing the radicalism of the movements of this cycle, the PCI defined itself against them, shifting to the right so as to eliminate any common ground with the movements. The results were doubly disastrous. While the PCI succeeded amply in differentiating the party from the movements of the cycle, it did not profit from doing so. The structural ambivalence of the PCI's position made this impossible: even as the DC exacted moderation and restraint as the price for any further progress towards power, the party's base demanded that the leadership deliver results as the price for continued acquiescence. Eventually the party forced the issue, bringing down the DC minority government in 1979 with the slogan 'Either in the government or in the opposition'; in the ensuing election the party's vote fell by 4%

relative to the previous general election. 1980 saw the party abandon the project of an alliance with the DC. Under Berlinguer's leadership, however, the party remained committed to a conservative institutional strategy, now to be delivered through an even more unlikely alliance with the PSI. The party's vote fell again in 1983 and again in 1987, the last national election it contested as a single party. The party's membership, which had risen every year from 1968 to 1976, fell every year from 1977 until its dissolution in 1991 (Istituto Carlo Cattaneo 2005).

As for the movements of the second cycle, their marches and demonstrations were policed off the streets; their 'social centres' and meeting-places, dubbed *covi* ('dens') and associated with terrorism by a hostile press, were raided and closed down. Alongside widespread demobilisation and enforced inactivity, this had more severe consequences. Since 1972, 'armed struggle' groups had been a small but constant presence alongside the mass movements. Faced with uniform political hostility and near-military policing tactics, a small but significant proportion of movement activists now began to take the 'armed struggle' route; the result, between 1976 and 1978, was a marked shift from overt to covert activism (see Table 2). For most this experience was short-lived, as the effective suppression of the movement deprived the new armed groups of the hinterland they needed to survive. However, while these groups existed they exerted competitive pressure on longer-established groups such as the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades; BR). The BR responded with more military organisation, greater professionalism and higher levels of violence - an apparently successful model which was briefly emulated by smaller groups (see Table 3). It is striking that it is only in 1980, with the overall level of armed actions far below the level of the previous three years, that the number of killings as a proportion of all armed actions rise above 5%. This is perhaps an example of 'outbidding' between rival armed groups (Tarrow 1989: 310; Edwards 2009: 186-7): a symptom of the closing phases of an exclusive engagement with a cycle of contention.

Table 2: Mass events and armed actions, 1970-81

	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981
Mass events	257	330	269	176	257	333	282	277	190	103	33	81

Armed actions	5	23	70	31	97	92	169	460	1110	802	258	141
Armed as %	1.9	6.5	20.6	15.0	27.4	21.6	37.5	62.4	85.4	88.6	88.7	63.5

Sources: Vinciguerra and Cipriani 1999, Progetto Memoria 1994

Table 3: Killings by armed struggle groups, 1970-81

	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981
BR	0	0	0	0	3	2	6	2	15	10	13	7
Other groups	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	3	13	11	4	8
Killings as %	0	4.3	0	0	4.1	3.3	4.7	1.1	2.5	2.6	6.6	10.6

Source: Progetto Memoria 1994

The costs of the PCI's exclusive engagement with the movements of the second cycle of contention were huge. The exclusion and ultimate suppression of the movements of the cycle condemned Italy to the *anni di piombo* ('years of lead'), the period of Italian history scarred by terrorist violence. As for the party itself, the resources for ideological and organisational renewal were squandered in the pursuit of a quixotically-conceived alliance with the DC and a narrowly 'respectable' image.

Conclusion: political opportunities and how to miss them

McAdam (1996) identifies four key components of the concept of political opportunity:

1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalised political system
2. The stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity
3. The presence or absence of elite allies
4. The state's capacity and propensity for repression

(McAdam 1996: 25)

The Italian political system, throughout the period under review, was a 'court' system, with multiple centres of power all effectively closed to new entrants; the Italian state had a varying propensity for repression but ample capacity. The two key variables for present purposes are the second and third: the PCI in its capacity as a candidate member of the Italian elite played a crucial gatekeeper role, admitting the innovations of the first set of movements to the political sphere and excluding those of the second.

This paper's analysis of the factors underlying the PCI's change of orientation also suggests that these two factors can be considered at a lower level, within the party itself. The instability of alignments within the party in the late 1960s, and the presence within the party of the left-wingers around *il manifesto*, made an opening to the left possible and desirable. In the absence of either, an exclusive engagement with the second cycle of contention was all too predictable. It was, nevertheless, an outcome which could have been avoided. The strategic direction set by Berlinguer, together with the tactical decisions made to establish his position within the party, were decisive in making the PCI's constructive engagement with the first cycle possible. Unfortunately, the same factors were also decisive in committing the party to an exclusive engagement with the second cycle, with disastrous consequences.

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